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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 000887

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SCUL TU GG AM
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON ARMENIAN CATHOLICOS

Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a November 3 meeting with the Ambassador, His Holiness Karekin II was upbeat about prospects for Armenia achieving peace with its neighbors. On Armenia's domestic political situation, the Catholicos spared no detail in describing the lengths to which he and the Armenian Church had gone to bring the GOAM and the opposition together prior to and following February's flawed presidential election. Karekin II also predicted that inaction with regard to Georgian church pressure on non-Georgian churches in Georgia--including Armenian ones--could be the impetus for future violence. END SUMMARY.

PONTIFF OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE REGION'S FUTURE

¶2. (C) In her introductory call on the head of the worldwide Armenian Apostolic Church, His Holiness Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians, the Ambassador explained that one of her top priorities is facilitating rapprochement between Armenia and its neighbors. In response, Karekin II said he was optimistic about the new opportunities present in nascent Armenian-Turkish relations, as well as in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. He said the GOAM is of the mind to move these processes forward and that "with U.S. help, resolutions with Turkey and on NK are at hand."

KAREKIN II ON ARMENIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS

¶3. (C) The Catholicos then proceeded to explain to Ambassador--in minute detail--the lengths to which he and the Church had gone to halt the spiral of events that followed February's flawed presidential elections. He said that he had been approached by a representative of former president and opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) who had asked him to be "among the heroic Catholicos of history" by siding with the opposition. Karekin II said he had responded that while he understood that LTP needed to protect his votes, "this country does not need a revolution." He noted that on many occasions he had tried to speak with LTP himself before and during the tragic events of March 1-2 to convince him that he should attempt to control his followers, but to no avail. (NOTE: Karekin II was one of the first public officials openly to congratulate Serzh Sargsian the day after his election victory, despite the reports of fraud and malfeasance that were still being received. END NOTE.)

¶4. (C) Karekin II claimed it was the opposition that sought to politicize his position by urging that the Church condemn the actions of the authorities. He relayed the story of the wives of political prisoners who approached him several months after their husbands had been arrested to ask that he issue a statement decrying the GOAM's actions in detaining

their spouses on political grounds. He noted with surprise that they had not asked that he intervene on their behalf with the GOAM to secure their husbands' release.

¶15. (C) The Catholicos stated that while the Church had always seen its role as the primary supporter of Armenian independence, often this support has been "misconstrued" as support for the authorities, a charge the Catholicos denied. (NOTE: At one point during the conversation, the Catholicos interrupted the Ambassador to answer a call on his special "government phone." This was clearly the Soviet-era "hotline" more often found on government ministers' desks to take calls from the President and other top officials. END NOTE.)

SERIOUS CONCERN ABOUT ARMENIAN CHURCHES IN GEORGIA

¶16. (C) Following up on a topic raised during the Catholicos' meeting with A/S Fried on October, the Ambassador informed the Catholicos that Ambassador Tefft would be discussing the issue of Georgian church officials commandeering and defacing Armenian and other non-Georgian churches in Georgia with the government in Tbilisi. His Holiness warned the Ambassador that were the activities of Georgian church officials to go unchecked indefinitely, there could be "tragic consequences and violence."

COMMENT

¶17. (C) The pontiff's was more optimistic than most about prospects for successful negotiations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, but it is not clear that he is speaking from an informed perspective.

¶18. (C) Though he went to great pains to paint a picture of Church impartiality in Armenian politics, we know that Karekin II has a close relationship with the authorities and has frequently taken pro-governmental stances in public and private. These positions, especially the Catholicos, avoidance of any public criticism of the authorities, actions during and after the election, have created disquiet and even anger among some believers. While dissenting voices exist within the clergy, they have kept their views hidden from the public. One such priest has described the Catholicos, silence on the March 1 events as "a festering wound" within the Church. Karekin II is understood by politically aware Armenians to be from the "Aparan clan" -- an influential old boys network of politicians and businessmen with roots in the town of Aparan who look out for each other's political interests. The clan's senior member is the Prosecutor General. The Catholicos is considered the second-most influential member of the Aparan clan, a perception that serves to reinforce Karekin II's close identification with the current authorities. END COMMENT.

YOVANOVITCH